

# CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK FOR STUDY GROUPS

*to mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day, January 27.*

## **International Holocaust Remembrance Day**

In 2005, the United Nations General Assembly designated January 27 as an annual international day of commemoration to honor the victims of the Nazi era. This date marks the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest Nazi death camp. Every member nation of the U.N. has an obligation to honor the memory of Holocaust victims and develop educational programs as part of the resolve to help prevent future acts of genocide. The U.N. resolution rejects denial of the Holocaust, and condemns discrimination and violence based on religion or ethnicity. To commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the Museum hosts a candle-lighting ceremony attended by the Washington, D.C. diplomatic community, Holocaust survivors, and the general public.

**SUBJECT: Traits that Transcend: a study of individuals, non-Jews, who risked their lives to save Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe and the lessons we learn from their actions.**

### **Suggested Goals:**

- To relate an accurate picture of history
- To become acquainted with the rescuers and the trait that each brought to bear once they made the decision to act
- To understand that one's background need not shape one's choices
- To explore the range of options individuals have that will make our world a better place
- To understand that individuals have the opportunity to enhance their own expectations to transcend their own limitations and obstacles
- To connect the legacy of the rescuers to the idea that people are able to make choices and to act on them even in the face of powerful constraints
- To acknowledge the question of today is not "if I were in their shoes, would I have acted in the same way?" Rather, the question is "how can I draw on the rescuers' examples today," acknowledging that the rescuers are not only heroes from the past, but also, role models for the future

### **Primary Resources:**

<http://bhamholocausteducation.org/web-links.htm>

Select "Thematic Links" then "Rescue" and open "Traits that Transcend," a *Poster Set on Rescue*.

These primary sources are posters of sixteen righteous Gentiles, their stories and distinct characteristics.

## **Righteous Gentiles:**

Varian Fry, Jerzy Radwanek, Marion Pritchard, Irena Sendler, Olga Rajsek, Hasmik and Tigran Tashtshian, Andre Tocme, Raoul Wallenberg, Jadviga Konochowicz, Aristides de Sousa Mendes, Dimitar Peshev, Preben Munch Nielsen, Olga Kukovic, Oskar Schindler, Chiune Sugihara, Eugenia Wasowska.

## **Traits**

<b>Courage:</b>	The state of mind that enables one to face danger, hardship or uncertainty with composure and resolve
<b>Integrity:</b>	Firm adherence to a moral code, especially in the face of adversity
<b>Self-Sacrifice:</b>	Giving up personal wants and needs for the sake of others or a cause
<b>Moral Leadership:</b>	The ability to influence others to accomplish a goal arising from a sense of right and wrong
<b>Compassion:</b>	A feeling of sympathy for the suffering of another and the desire to alleviate it
<b>Cooperation:</b>	Working together toward a common goal or purpose
<b>Social Responsibility:</b>	A sense of obligation to ensure the welfare of others
<b>Ingenuity:</b>	Inventive skill or cleverness in confronting a challenge

## **The Legacy of the Rescue**

During the Holocaust in Nazi-occupied Europe, righteous Gentiles risked their lives to save Jews. The most salient fact about the rescues was the fact that it was rare. And, these individuals who risked their lives were far outnumbered by those who took part in the murder of the Jews. These rescuers were even more outnumbered by those who stood by and did nothing.

Yet, this aspect of history certainly should be taught to highlight the fact that the rescuers were ordinary people from diverse backgrounds who held on to basic values, who undertook extraordinary risks. The rescuers were people who before the war began were not saving lives or risking their own to defy unjust laws. They were going about their business and not necessarily in the most principled manner.

Thus, we ask the question: “what is the legacy of these rescuers that impact our lives and guide us in making our world a better place.”

### **Observation A**

#### **A range of responses did exist.**

The phenomenon of rescue shows that, during the Holocaust, people had the ability to make choices. Given the extreme circumstances of German occupation, the decision to help Jews was not an easy one. Arguably, it was not the obviously moral one, since doing so often endangered the lives of one's family members. In acknowledging the fact that some individuals risked everything to save Jews, we should not straight away condemn those who chose to do so. We should simply recognize that, in the midst of severe hardship and peril, a range of choices did exist. As the rescuers - along with the perpetrators and bystanders - illustrate, these choices led to drastically different actions.

### **Connection A**

#### **We have the ability to make choices.**

The fact that people living under German occupation or under collaborationist regimes made different choices with respect to the plight of the Jews, invites us to look at the human agency - the idea that individuals have the capacity to make decisions and to act on them. Contemplation of the Holocaust often yields claims about the deficiencies of human nature. Such beliefs are understandable, but they obscure a more basic insight. The individuals who planned and carried out the genocide of European Jewry made decisions to take part. Those who rescued Jews also made choices, as did the bystanders who neither harmed nor helped. The perpetrators do not confirm man's innate depravity, just as the rescuers do not confirm his innate decency. The Holocaust does not prove that human beings are inherently anything. What it does show is that people are able to make choices and to act on them, even in the face of powerful constraints. The subject of rescue brings the promise of human agency to the fore.

### **Observation B**

#### **There was no typical rescuer.**

Although we speak of Righteous Gentiles (as the non-Jewish rescuers are known) as a distinct group of people, it is important to recognize the diversity of their backgrounds. Just as there is a danger of caricaturing the perpetrators and the victims of the Holocaust, there is a danger of doing the same to the rescuers. The truth is that these individuals varied a great deal. In addition to coming from every country the Germans occupied, rescuers came from all walks of life. They were of different ages, social classes, education levels, economic spheres, political beliefs, and religious backgrounds. Among those who helped were farmers and diplomats, partisans and preachers, men and women, Christians and Muslims (there were Jewish rescuers as well, but our focus for this project is limited to Righteous, i.e., non-Jews), teenagers and adults. It is important to acknowledge that rescuers defy easy classification.

## **Connection B**

### **Biography is not destiny.**

The diversity of rescuers' backgrounds also speaks to the idea of human potential. The fact that the individuals who saved Jews varied along sociological variables such as age, gender, social class, education, occupation, political beliefs, and religion shows that there were no typical rescuer. There was no checklist of achievements; no disqualifying features. One did not have to be in a position of power or wealth. Nor did one need a perfect record of good behavior. The flipside of this point is also important: just as anyone living under German occupation could have helped Jews to survive, anyone could have aided in their destruction. Unremarkable individuals became rescuers, and ordinary people became perpetrators. The message – one of empowerment and caution – is that one's background need not shape one's choices and actions. Rescue shows that individuals have the potential to transcend the expectations of their own biography.

## **Observation C**

### **Rescuers exhibited well-known traits.**

Despite their differences, rescuers drew on a reservoir of familiar traits in their efforts to save Jews. By highlighting characteristics that helped to guide or sustain rescuers' actions – e.g., courage, ingenuity, self-sacrifice, the basic question is: “How were they able to do it?” This is distinct from the question, “Why did they do it?” Attempts to pinpoint the causes of human behavior are fraught with difficulty, so it is understandable that studies of rescue have not drawn consensus on the “why” question. We can nonetheless identify traits that rescuers brought to bear once they made the decision to act – traits that are plainly evident in their stories.

## **Connection C**

### **We, too, can develop these traits.**

Pointing out traits that rescuers exhibited – traits that are familiar and accessible today – can make their actions more resonant. Study group participants are unlikely to face the difficulties and dilemmas that one encountered in trying to save a Jew in Nazi-occupied Europe. However, they do face countless situations that present hard choices: situations that test their character. The attributes that rescuers relied on are ones that individuals can cultivate and bring to bear in their own lives. That is the basic premise of this study. The question to ask is not, “If I were in their shoes, would I have acted the same way?” but rather, “How can I draw on their example today?” Answering this question affirms the significance of the rescuers and honors their legacy. It shows that these men and women are not just heroes from the past, but also, role models for the present.

## **Suggested Approaches**

1. Compare acts of rescue to highlight the differences and similarities among the acts of rescue. Comparisons should note the kind of rescue activity, risks, challenges and outcomes.
2. Explore rescuers' motivations, what they said about their own actions to help understand why they choose to do what they did. Discuss the statements made by the rescuers. Identify attitudes, beliefs, and emotions that seem to have influenced the rescuers' actions. In addition, participants may want to discuss the ways in which religious convictions served as a motivating factor for some of the rescuers.
3. Consider the importance of cooperation, a crucial aspect of rescue.
4. Debate the morality of disobedience. Not only did those who undertook rescue work break the laws of their government. Some also disobeyed their superiors. The questions raised might be:

How can one reconcile rescuers' disobedience to their authority with their life-saving actions?

How might these individuals have interpreted social responsibility and integrity, traits that are typically associated with respect for authority?

Under what circumstances is it acceptable to break the rules and to defy the powers that be?

To what lengths should one go or what we believe is right?

5. Contrasting rescuers from different backgrounds, as the individuals who became rescuers Varied across a range of sociological variables. Consider the following questions:
  - How did these individuals differ in the types of rescue they performed?
  - What resources were those who were in a position of power able to draw upon that enabled them to rescue many people?
  - What unique difficulties did they face?
  - How were those who were seemingly powerless able to overcome the limitations or obstacles they faced to be successful in their rescue work?
  - What resources did they draw on?

- How did the trait associated with each rescuer factor into his or her success?
  - What similarities can we identify among the rescuers in the two groups, both in terms of their actions and the traits they displayed.
6. Make sense of the rescuers' flaws. Discuss how one can reconcile the following true statements with the fact that each of these men risked his life to save the lives of so many people. How might these statements below shape our understanding of the rescuers in general? How might they shape our understanding of our own potential?
- Varian Fry had difficulty keeping friends and often got into trouble at school; he was almost expelled from college.
  - Dimitar Peshev supported Bulgaria's anti-Jewish legislation and his country's alliance with Germany.
  - Oskar Schindler was a weak student, was unfaithful to his wife, and drank too much.
7. Understanding why the rescuers were so few begs the question of "why most people living under German occupation chose not to help their Jewish neighbors?" Perhaps it was the strict set of circumstances of living under German occupation, including:
- the German use of violence and terror on civilian populations
  - the scarcity of food, medicine and other basic resources
  - extensive local collaboration with German forces and authorities
  - many people supported or were indifferent to the persecution and murder of the Jews
  - widespread antisemitism
  - consequences of getting caught
  - the hurdles of helping a Jew escape
  - moral calculus of risking one's life and the lives of one's family members
- Or study group participants may have more ideas as to why rescue was rare.
8. Have each participant define his/her own obligations felt toward people in their lives and toward groups to which they belong. Then have each participant identify ways in which

to fulfill the obligations. Participants may want to make a personal chart that includes the obligations, the ways to act on them, and traits that will help to reach success.

9. Write this quote on the board- from Rabbi Harold Schulweis, the founder of The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous-

*Goodness is a powerful mirror. Goodness challenges us in a way that evil does not.*

Begin a discussion of what that quote means to each participant. There will be a variety of responses. Some of which may include that the deeds of the rescuers highlight traits and attitudes that we should aspire to adopt rather than ones we should try to avoid.

Unlike the perpetrators and the bystanders, the rescuers challenge us to be better, to ask more of ourselves.

## **Resources**

Content material can be downloaded from the following websites. The primary “text” for this study is the set of posters illustrating the lives of rescuers. These posters can be found on the following website:

<http://www.jfr.org/pages/education/for-teachers/jfr-poster-set-on-the-rescue-traits-that-transcend>

Other resources include:

### **The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous**

[http://www.jfr.org/site/PageServer?pagename=sup\\_map](http://www.jfr.org/site/PageServer?pagename=sup_map)

### **The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

[www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)

### **Yad Vashem – The Holocaust Martyr’s and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority**

[www.yadvashem.org](http://www.yadvashem.org)

### **Birmingham Holocaust Education Center**

<http://www.bhamholocausteducation.org/>

This curriculum was created by The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous. This organization honors and supports Righteous Gentiles, non-Jews – mainly Christians, some Muslims as well – who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. The Foundation provides monthly financial support to more than 1,400 aged and needy rescuers in 27 countries. Through its national education program, the Foundation also preserves the legacy of the Righteous and educates teachers and students about the history of the Holocaust.

For more information about JFR, visit the online address at [www.jfr.org](http://www.jfr.org), call toll free to 1.888.421.1212, or email JFR at [jfr@jfr.org](mailto:jfr@jfr.org).